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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Radical JVP party ramps up campaign in south and seems to be gaining strength

Refs: Colombo 490, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Ahead of Sri Lanka's April 2 parliamentary election, the radical JVP party is running hard in Sri Lanka's south. The party appears to be garnering strength, though some of its support may be siphoned away by a small party running an all-Buddhist monk slate of candidates. In a sign of their increasing confidence, JVP leaders are reportedly discussing what ministries they will take over if their alliance with the President's party wins the election. While much could still happen, it appears that the JVP will be able to solidify further its position as one of Sri Lanka's leading political parties on April 2. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) JVP RUNNING HARD: As Sri Lanka's April 2 parliamentary election draws nearer, the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party is running a very active campaign in the south of the country. Most of the JVP's campaign rallies and related activities are being conducted at the village-level in Sri Lanka's "Sinhalese Buddhist belt" in the deep south, where the JVP has traditionally garnered a high degree of support. From anecdotal reports that Mission is picking up, the JVP's rallies are well-attended and the party is gaining volunteers for its campaign efforts. (As the JVP is Marxist by philosophy, the rallies are noticeable for their copious use of red flags and bunting.) Mission has also heard that the JVP rallies are more lively and often larger than those held by its political ally, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and by the United National Party (UNP). (The SLFP and the JVP are the core elements in an electoral alliance called the United People's Freedom Alliance, "UPFA." Despite their alliance, the two parties are essentially running separate campaigns throughout the country. The two parties have only participated in several large joint rallies, for example.) According to contacts in the party, the JVP plans to ramp up its rallies in the last days of the campaign and to launch a large-scale "get out the vote" effort on election day.

3. (C) PARTY SEEMS TO BE GAINING STRENGTH: An exact barometric reading of how the JVP is faring is hard to come by. The few polls about the parliamentary race that have come out do not delineate in a clear "horse race"-type style how the separate parties are doing head-to-head (see Reftels). That said, the polls do indicate that the UPFA alliance is doing very well among members of the majority Sinhalese ethnic group. The UPFA is probably doing so well among Sinhalese in large part because of the JVP's strength with that community. Taranjit Sandhu, the Indian High Commission polcouns, for example, told polchief March 18 that he thought the JVP was "holding up its side of the bargain for the UPFA by gaining strong support from villagers in Sinhalese Buddhist areas."

4. (C) With respect to predictions of how it will all turn out on April 2, observers generally expect that the JVP will substantially improve on its surprisingly strong performance in the December 2001 parliamentary election when it won over 9 percent of the vote and took 16 seats in Parliament. Various numbers have been bandied about, but most observers believe that the party will probably win over 20 seats in Parliament on April 2. This would be quite an impressive performance by a party that had only one seat in Parliament as recently as 2000.

5. (C) A CHALLENGE FROM ALL-MONK SLATE: Despite the predictions of possible gains by the JVP, contacts have identified one potential fly in the ointment for the party: the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party. The JHU is a small party that -- in an unprecedented move in Sri Lankan politics -- is running an all-Buddhist monk slate of candidates. Like the JVP, the JHU is harshly skeptical of the peace process with the Tamil Tigers and

leans decidedly leftist on economic issues. In light of these similarities, many observers believe that the JHU may siphon away a chunk of those who would have voted for the JVP.

16. (SBU) MINISTERIAL POSITIONS?: At this point, with the JVP riding high, there is increasing discussion in the press that the party will take over several ministries if the UPFA wins the election. (It has never been officially disclosed, but the SLFP and JVP are believed to have worked out a deal that would allow the JVP to assume several ministerial positions if the UPFA wins.) One March 21 press report, for example, stated that Wimal Weerawansa, a JVP MP and spokesman, has been asserting at public rallies in the south that the JVP will -- if the UPFA wins -- take over the ministries of: (1) Agriculture, Lands, and Irrigation; (2) Fisheries and Aquatic Resources; (3) Rural Development; and (4) Culture and National Heritage. Weerawansa has also announced he would become the Culture and National Heritage Minister in a possible UPFA government. In a further display of confidence by the JVP, Pemasiri Manage, a JVP candidate from Matara District in the south, has reportedly been claiming in stump speeches that he will be the next deputy minister of fisheries.

17. (C) COMMENT: Come April 2, it appears that the JVP will be able to solidify further its position as one of Sri Lanka's leading political parties. This would be quite an accomplishment for a party that is best known for leading two failed insurgencies against the GSL, and was given up for dead after the complete failure of the last of these in 1989. Despite the currently positive signs for the JVP, however, much could still happen in the last days of the campaign. The UNP, for example, is pouring a lot of money into the campaign and could make gains. In addition, the JVP made some mistakes in the days leading up to the last parliamentary election in 2001, which made the party seem very strident to the public, and it lost support. If such mistakes are replicated, the JVP's current momentum could quickly vanish.

18. (C) The JVP effort stirs up unpleasant memories for older Sri Lankans. Several newspapers have run historical articles lately recapping the brutality of the JVP before it turned to the political forum. One article, for example, included a long list of school principals murdered by the JVP in the late 1980s. During a courtesy call by SA DAS Patterson March 22, a senior Commerce Ministry official unexpectedly opened the conversation with an agitated account of how he had been on a JVP hit list many years ago and how he found it unbelievable that President Kumaratunga could be so callous as to ally herself with the movement that probably murdered her husband. (Vijaya Kumaratunga was assassinated in 1988. It is not clear who did it, but there is much speculation that the JVP was involved.) Feelings on the JVP clearly run deep. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

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